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How a Soviet Secret Was Finally Pierced

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

Sleuth learned Russian scientist and missing American were same.

ABOUT three years ago a kind of obsession began to take hold of Dr. Mark M. Kuchment, a 48-year-old science historian who emigrated to this country in 1975 from the Soviet Union.

While interviewing Soviet émigrés for a Harvard University research project, Dr. Kuchment kept hearing stories of an American engineer who had achieved dazzling success in the secret world of Soviet military research. An American? How could that be?

Dr. Kuchment, who was born in the Ukrainian port city of Odessa and educated in Russia, set out to find the answers. In doing so he would ultimately solve a mystery of science and international intrigue that had baffled scholars and Federal agents for a third of a century.

Dr. Mark M. Kuchment found that top Soviet researcher was Alfred Sarant, above.

The tale pieced together by Dr. Kuchment finally revealed that Filipp Georgievich Staros, a high official in the secretive world of Soviet military research, and Alfred Sarant, an American engineer who fled the United States after the arrest of his close friend Julius Rosenberg in 1950, were one and the same.

Dr. Kuchment, who teaches at Boston University and is a fellow at the Russian Research Center at Harvard, described his detective work in a recent interview. He said his inquiry shed little light on the debate over the guilt or innocence of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 after being convicted of passing atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union.

But he believes that it does reveal much about Soviet technology, about the flexibility of Soviet officials in exploiting the skills of a foreigner and about the mentality and motives of a defector who took up life in the Soviet Union.

"It's a strange and interesting story," said Dr. David Holloway, an expert at Stanford University on the Soviet military, as he reflected on how an American could become so well entrenched in the Soviet military. "As far as I know the case is unique — somebody coming from abroad and not only getting an important research post in the Soviet Union but a military one as well."

Dr. Kuchment says he was intrigued by the idea of an American scientist seeking out a country that he, a science historian, had so gladly left behind.

The man described to Dr. Kuchment by émigrés as an American was the chief designer at a military research laboratory in Leningrad and was the driving force behind the establishment in the Soviet Union of the field known there as "microelectronics," computers that use transistors and silicon chips instead of bulky tubes.

The name of the mysterious innovator was said to be Filipp Georgievich Staros.

"I was amazed that an American had made it in the military, and I thought it would be a difficult story to confirm," Dr. Kuchment recalled the other day at his apartment in Cambridge, Mass. But the science historian soon came across a very significant fact. "Staros had won the Soviet State Prize," he said. "So there was a public record on the guy."

'Brilliant' Researcher Died in 1979

In a Soviet yearbook Dr. Kuchment found a biographical sketch. He also learned that Mr. Staros had died in 1979 and found an an obituary in the Government newspaper Izvestia that hailed his research as "brilliant."

But some of the new information was impossible to confirm. It was said, for instance, that Mr. Staros had graduated from the University of Toronto, but the registrar's office there had no record of such a person.

Who was the person behind the false identity? "He was probably a foreigner because they put him at Toronto," Dr. Kuchment recalled. "And there were other clues. The name Staros sounds Greek, so I assumed he was a Greek American."

The breakthrough came after nearly two years of interviewing and research, and after Dr. Kuchment had almost given up hope of solving the riddle.

"I had gathered many little facts on his life in the Soviet Union — that Staros was married to an American woman, for example, and that they had arrived from Czechoslovakia after spending some years there."

"The insight came in the summer of 1983," he continued. "I had to go to Europe on business and I decided I would try to meet with some emigrants from Czechoslovakia so I would have a better understanding of where the Americans had come from. I made the contacts, but to no avail. They didn't know a thing."

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